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SUBJECT: WEEKLY ELECTION ROUNDUP - MAY 16-23

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¶1. (U) Weekly election roundup for May 16-23.

¶2. (U) Final Polls: Uribe Holds Steady, Serpa Slips: The latest polls, released by Bogota daily El Tiempo May 21, both confirmed the likelihood of Uribe's first round victory and previewed what might be a surprise ending to the race for second place. According to the poll, Uribe continues to hold steady in the mid-50 percent range, with 54.7 percent of likely voters saying they will re-elect the president on Sunday. The same poll, however, found that leftist Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA) candidate Carlos Gaviria is likely to defeat third-time Liberal candidate Horacio Serpa for second place: Gaviria is predicted to receive 23.4 percent of the vote, while Serpa's numbers have fallen from a mid-April high of 20 percent to a mere 10 percent. If poll predictions are borne out, the Liberal Party will finish outside the top two spots for the first time in the nine elections since the end of the Conservative and Liberal power sharing agreement (1958-1974). Former Bogota mayor Antanas Mockus, whose campaign has developed little traction, registered only 2.1 percent of the likely vote. The other two candidates, Carlos Rincon and Enrique Parejo, continue to hover under half a percent.

¶3. (U) End of the Trail, Part 1 - Uribe Does His Best Costena Impersonation: Public campaigning officially ended on May 21 although candidates can continue to campaign at private events during this last week. President Uribe closed the Bogota portion of his campaign with a rally in Plaza Bolivar May 19. He spent the weekend trying to bolster his support along the Atlantic Coast, where his polling numbers are weakest, through stops in several cities, including Valledupar and Cartagena. Wearing a white guyabera and using coastal idioms, he encouraged voters to get to the polls next Sunday in order to avoid "surprises" Monday morning. During his speech in Valledupar, Uribe announced the creation of a subsidy for people who have been disabled as a result of the internal conflict. Uribe also "apologized" for not participating in any organized debates with his opponents,

saying that he had spent the last four years debating with them.

¶4. (U) End of the Trail, Part 2 - Gaviria Fills the Plaza Bolivar: Two days after Uribe's end-of-public-campaign rally at Plaza Bolivar in Bogota, PDA candidate Carlos Gaviria held his own event. The plaza was filled with yellow-clad Gaviria supporters, including Colombian writer Laura Restrepo.

Despite the rain, supporters stood for six hours to listen to pop singer Andrea Echeverri and the candidate's twenty-minute speech, in which he promised to open a dialogue with all armed groups if elected. Earlier in the day, Gaviria attended campaign events in both Choco and Medellin. In Medellin, both Uribe's and Gaviria's home Department, Gaviria told a group of 10,000, "Uribe must be stopped." Gaviria will make a final stop in Putumayo and Huila Departments, deferred from the end of April, so that he could attend Liliana Gaviria's funeral (sister of former president Cesar Gaviria), before returning to Bogota.

¶5. (U) End of the Trail, Part 3 - Serpa Pauses in Bogota After Weeks of Travel: Liberal candidate Horacio Serpa ended a month of campaign travels throughout the country with 11 separate stops in and around Bogota on Sunday, May 21. Choosing not to focus on his falling numbers, Serpa told supporters that Sunday's poll indicated that there would be a second round given the margin of error, contrary to conventional wisdom. Serpa's recent speeches and interviews have highlighted his childhood poverty and his promises to attend to the needs of Colombia's poor if elected. Serpa will continue his travels this week, visiting Departments in the east, west and coastal regions of Colombia before returning to Bogota on the eve of the elections.

¶6. (U) Confusion For Colombians Voting Overseas: The GOC has worked to ensure more Colombians living overseas vote in Sunday's elections. Efforts included creating over 100 polling stations in the United States and other countries, including France, Spain, Germany, and Venezuela. Conflicting information on required identity documents may undermine efforts to get out the foreign vote, however. The National Election Council (NEC) first said voters could present a passport, but announced on May 18 that all voters must have a Colombian national identity card. Later that same day, the NEC reversed itself, saying voters without national ID cards could use their passports.

¶7. (SBU) Ballot Counter Fraud Measures in Place: Emboffs met with Thomas Greg & Sons, the company that prints and distributes all Colombian election materials, including ballots and proof of voting documents. Thomas Greg uses a barcode system to confirm all ballots are accounted for and sent to the correct locations for counting. In addition, they use a sophisticated anti-fraud scheme involving compartmentalizing workers and constant electronic surveillance. Voting urns are currently being held in guarded warehouses throughout Colombia; they will be delivered to polling locations at 5:00 AM on election day. Extra ballots and rented aircraft are on standby to deliver replacements in the event any voting materials are destroyed or damaged. Thomas Greg officials told Emboffs their 2002 election contract included design for a Serpa-Uribe runoff; this year, runoff preparations were not included. If a second round is necessary, bids would be due 24 hours after the first round election. Thomas Greg said the worst case scenario would involve Uribe receiving just under 50 percent and Serpa and Gaviria in a dead heat for second. With the runoff scheduled for June 18, only 3 weeks away, any delay in the announcement of the two candidates would make it difficult to be ready on time.

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